DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 353 536 CG 024 754

AUTHOR Cochran, Caroline; Frazier, Patricia
TITLE Sexual Harassment on Campus: Prevalence, Responses, and Definitions.
PUB DATE Aug 92
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented to the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (100th, Washington, DC, August 14-18, 1992).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Faculty; College Students; Employee Attitudes; Employees; *Higher Education; Incidence; Sex Differences; *Sexual Harassment; Student Attitudes; Universities

ABSTRACT

As recent events attest, sexual harassment is an important yet misunderstood problem. Because it has only recently been recognized as a significant issue, research on sexual harassment is somewhat limited. Knowledge of the prevalence and effects on sexual harassment on campus is necessary to ensure that all people have access to a safe and non-threatening environment in which to learn and work. This study assessed the prevalence and definitions of, attitudes toward, and responses to sexual harassment among 4,011 male and female students, faculty, and staff on a university campus. Females and undergraduates reported the highest rates of sexual harassment. The most common responses to harassment were to ignore the behavior and to avoid the perpetrator. Common effects of harassment included interference with performance, inability to concentrate, and various negative emotions. Females defined more behaviors as harassing and had more sympathetic attitudes toward harassment than males. Undergraduates viewed fewer behaviors as harassing and graduate students had the most sympathetic attitudes toward harassment. Further research is needed on the reasons why many victims choose not to move beyond documenting the prevalence and effects of harassment to developing, implementing, and evaluating interventions that can make campuses safer environments in which to learn and work. (ABL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED353536

Sexual Harassment on Campus: Prevalence, Responses, and Definitions

Caroline Cochran and Patricia Frazier
Department of Psychology
University of Minnesota
Elliott Hall
Minneapolis, MN 55455

Poster presented at the 1992 meeting of the
American Psychological Association, Washington, D.C.

Abstract

This study assessed the prevalence and definitions of, attitudes toward, and responses to sexual harassment among 4,011 male and female students, faculty, and staff on a University campus. Females and undergraduates reported the highest rates of sexual harassment. The most common responses to harassment were to ignore the behavior and avoid the perpetrator. Common effects of harassment included interference with performance, inability to concentrate, and various negative emotions. Females defined more behaviors as harassing and had more sympathetic attitudes toward harassment than males. Undergraduates viewed fewer behaviors as harassing and graduate students had the most sympathetic attitudes toward harassment.

Introduction

As recent events attest, sexual harassment is an important yet misunderstood problem. Because it has only recently been recognized as a significant issue, research on sexual harassment is somewhat limited. Knowledge of the prevalence and effects of sexual harassment on campus is necessary to ensure that all people have access to a safe and non-threatening environment in which to learn and work.

Research to date on sexual harassment in academia has taken several forms. One type of research attempts to document the prevalence of sexual harassment among various groups on campus. The prevalence of sexual harassment among female undergraduate students has been studied most frequently. In general, this research suggests that about 30% of female undergraduates report some form of sexual harassment, although estimates range from a low of 17% (McCormack, 1985) to a high of 89% (Mazer & Percival, 1989). Estimates of the prevalence of harassment among female graduate students are similar (see e.g., Fitzgerald et al., 1988). The prevalence of sexual harassment among male students has been studied less frequently, although males appear to be less likely to experience sexual harassment than females (McCormack, 1985). Research on the prevalence of harassment among female staff and faculty is much less common (see Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Grauerholz, 1989), and research on harassment of male faculty and staff is nonexistent. Finally, few studies have compared prevalence rates across groups. Comparative data provide important information as to which groups on campus are most at risk so that interventions can be targeted at high risk groups.

To better understand the problem of sexual harassment one must not only investigate its occurrence but also its effects. Somewhat surprisingly, very little research has investigated either behavioral (i.e., actions taken) or emotional reactions to sexual harassment. Studies that have examined actual - rather than hypothetical - responses suggest that ignoring the behavior, avoiding the perpetrator, talking to friends or family, and confronting the perpetrator are the most common responses (e.g., Caemmert, 1985; Grauerholz, 1989). The one study on the effects of harassment found that the most frequent emotional effects were anger, frustration, depression, anxiety, and distrust (Caemmert, 1985). Several women also reported that the harassment had affected had their academic standing.

CG024754

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Caroline Cochran
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Another type of research on sexual harassment has examined definitions of and attitudes toward harassment. This is important because there is little agreement regarding what actually constitutes sexual harassment. In an effort to address this issue, researchers have asked respondents - most often undergraduate students - to indicate whether they consider various behaviors to be harassing. The most consistent findings are that explicit sexual propositions, physical advances, and sexual bribery are most likely to be defined as harassment (e.g., Adams et al., 1983) and that men see fewer behaviors as harassing than do women (Saal et al., 1989). Little attention has been paid to differences in definitions and attitudes across students, faculty, and staff. Differences in perceptions regarding what constitutes harassment could exacerbate the problem.

In sum, the available data suggest that sexual harassment may be a relatively common experience among female students. Data on the sexual harassment of male students, as well as of male and female faculty and staff, are lacking. In addition, more data are needed on behavioral and emotional reactions to sexual harassment. Given ambiguities in definitions of sexual harassment, more research also is needed on perceptions of what constitutes harassment, particularly among faculty and staff on a University campus.

The purpose of this research was to assess: (a) the prevalence of sexual harassment; (b) behavioral and emotional responses to sexual harassment; and (c) definitions of and attitudes toward sexual harassment among male and female students, faculty, and staff.

Method

Data were analyzed from a sexual harassment survey conducted at a large midwestern university. Surveys were mailed to 5,313 individuals and were returned from 523 graduate students, 1554 undergraduate students, 789 academic employees, and 1145 civil service staff (n = 4,011). Thirty percent of the respondents were male (n = 1192) and 68% (n = 2742) were female (2% did not indicate their sex). The overall response rate was 76%.

The first section of the survey contained questions regarding the prevalence of sexual harassment developed from previous sexual harassment surveys conducted at other universities. The instrument contained questions on experiences with seven sexually harassing behaviors (e.g., unwanted pressure for dates), including whether respondents had ever experienced each behavior. Respondents were also asked to indicate how they had responded to their worst experience of harassment (e.g., confronted the perpetrator). Participants also could respond to an optional open-ended question that asked for a detailed description of the effects of the incident. Responses were placed into 27 categories based on a review of all responses by the second author. Three additional raters independently categorized the responses. Complete agreement was reached on 59% of the items and two raters agreed on an additional 30% of the items. The raters then met and discussed the remaining 11% of the items and reached a consensus as to their proper category.

To assess definitions of sexual harassment, respondents indicated whether or not they considered each of 10 behaviors to be sexual harassment. A total score was created by summing the number of behaviors defined as harassment.

Finally, respondents rated their agreement with 7 statements reflecting attitudes toward sexual harassment (e.g., People who receive annoying sexual attention usually have provoked it; 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree). A scale score was created by averaging responses across these items; higher scores indicate less sympathetic attitudes (alpha = .71).

Results

Overall, 43% of the sample reported experiencing some form of harassment at least once (Table 1). The most common form of harassment was "unwanted

teasing, jokes, remarks, or questions of a sexual nature". A two-way ANOVA assessing group and sex differences revealed that undergraduates were most likely to report harassment and that females were more likely to report harassment than males within the total sample (and within each group).

The most common responses to sexual harassment were to ignore the behavior or avoid contact with the perpetrator (Table 2). Talking to family, friends, or co-workers also was common. About one-fourth of the sample reported confronting the perpetrator although very few filed a formal complaint.

Sixty-six percent of the responses to the open-ended question about the effects of the harassment fell into 7 of the 27 categories, and included interference with work, concentration problems, general stress, and avoidance (Table 3). Other responses included various emotions such as anger, fear, anxiety, depression, powerlessness, and disillusionment. Several individuals stated that the harassment had negatively affected their work or social relationships. Few individuals reported punitive consequences (e.g., adverse evaluations) although more subtle forms of discrimination (e.g., being denied opportunities) were mentioned.

Overall, most respondents viewed all 10 behaviors as harassment (Table 4). The behaviors most likely to be viewed as harassment were unwanted letters or phone calls of a sexual nature (97%), unwanted touching (98%), and unwanted pressure for sexual activity (98%). The behavior least likely to be defined as harassment was "any suggestion of possible romantic or sexual involvement made by a faculty member or TA to a student" (65%). A two-way ANOVA used to examine group and sex differences in definitions of harassment revealed that females viewed more behaviors as harassing than did males and that undergraduates viewed fewer behaviors as harassing than the other groups.

A two-way ANOVA also revealed significant group and sex differences in attitudes toward sexual harassment (Table 3). Specifically, females had more sympathetic attitudes than males and graduate students had more sympathetic attitudes than the other groups.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the prevalence of, responses to, and definitions of sexual harassment among a broad range of individuals on a University campus. Overall, almost half of the sample report experiencing one form of sexual harassment at least once. Most of these experiences consist of less severe forms of harassment such as unwanted teasing, jokes, remarks, or questions of a sexual nature. Women at all levels within the university are at significant risk of experiencing sexually harassing behaviors and are more likely than men to experience harassment. Group differences in sexual harassment also exist, with undergraduates reporting more harassment than graduate students, faculty, or civil service staff. Although undergraduates are at highest risk, over one third of each of the other groups report some experience with sexual harassment.

The most common responses to sexually harassing behaviors - even the most severe types of harassment - are to ignore the behavior and to avoid contact with the perpetrator. In one sense these findings are validating to those who have experienced harassment, been upset by it, and yet not reported it. On the other hand, they suggest that current policies and procedures for reporting sexual harassment on campus may be inadequate. As Riger (1991) has suggested, harassment policies and procedures may discourage women from reporting because they have been designed to reflect male perspectives on harassment which differ from those of females.

The most common effect of the harassment was to avoid the perpetrator in some way, such as by avoiding class or work. Although this may not seem like a major effect, these avoidance behaviors often cause major stress and disruption in victims' lives. The harassment also interfered with both work

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

and academic performance and many students report that their grades suffered as a result. On an emotional level, victims report feelings of anxiety, anger, depression, fear, and powerlessness, as well as disillusionment with the university. Thus, victims of sexual harassment may be seriously handicapped both emotionally and behaviorally. Avoidance behaviors are likely to diminish learning opportunities and strong negative emotions may decrease one's ability to function effectively in the academic environment.

The final purpose of this study was to assess definitions of and attitudes toward sexual harassment. Overall, the majority of respondents define all ten of the behaviors as sexual harassment. For example, 78% of the sample define the most commonly experienced behavior (i.e., sexual teasing and jokes) to be harassment. As in previous studies, women define more behaviors as harassing than do men and have more sympathetic attitudes toward harassment. Interestingly, undergraduates, who are most likely to experience the behaviors assessed, are least likely to define them as harassment and are less sympathetic than graduate students or faculty. Because differences in definitions and attitudes could lead to miscommunication, these comparative data could be useful in designing educational experiences geared toward increasing understanding among students, faculty, and staff.

Although this study expanded on prior research, it was also limited in several respects and suggests areas for future research. First, in order to facilitate comparisons across studies, it would have been preferable to use a standardized measure of sexual harassment such as the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (Fitzgerald et al., 1988). Second, the survey allowed for only an initial investigation of the effects of sexual harassment. Using an open-ended response format allowed us to identify, from the victims' perspectives, the many ways that sexual harassment can effect victims. This information can be useful to future researchers who can investigate these responses in a more comprehensive manner. Third, further research is needed on the reasons why many victims choose not to report even quite severe incidents of harassment. Finally, we need to move beyond documenting the prevalence and effects of harassment to developing, implementing, and evaluating interventions that can make our campuses safer environments in which to learn and work.

References

Adams, J., Kottke, J., & Padgitt, J. (1983). Sexual harassment of University students. Journal of College Student Personnel, 24, 484-490.

Cammaert, L. (1985). How widespread is sexual harassment on campus? International Journal of Women's Studies, 8, 388-397.

Fitzgerald, L., Shullman, S., Bailey, N., Richards, M., Swecker, J., Gold, Y., Ormerod, M., & Weitzman, L. (1988). The incidence and dimensions of sexual harassment in academia and the workplace. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 32, 152-175.

Grauerholz, E. (1989). Sexual harassment of women professors by students: Exploring the dynamics of power, authority, and gender in a university setting. Sex Roles, 21, 789-801.

Mazer, D., & Percival, E. (1989). Students' experiences of sexual harassment at a small University. Sex Roles, 20, 1-22.

McCormack, A. (1985). The sexual harassment of students by teachers: The case of students in science. Sex Roles, 13, 21-32.

Riger, S. (1991). Gender dilemmas in sexual harassment policies and procedures. American Psychologist, 46, 497-505.

Saal, F., Johnson, C., & Weber, N. (1989). Friendly or sexy? It may depend on who you ask. Psychology of Women Quarterly, 13, 263-276.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Table 1

Percentages of Respondents Reporting Ever Having Experienced Sexual Harassment

	Total	Males	Females
All respondents	43	25[1]	50[2]
Undergraduates	54[a]	38[1]	58[2]
Graduates	34[b]	17[1]	39[2]
Civil Service staff	37[b]	21[1]	45[2]
Academic staff	36[b]	19[1]	49[2]

n = 3594. [a,b] = group differences, $p<.001$ [1,2] = sex differences, $p<.001$. Different superscripts indicate significant between-group differences.

Table 2

Percentage of Respondents Reporting Each Response to their Worst Experience of Harassment

Ignored behavior	60
Avoided contact with perpetrator	44
Talked with family or friends	28
Talked to students or coworkers	25
Confronted person	24
Went along with behavior	8
Talked to official informally	8
Talked to counselor or advocate	4
Lodged a formal complaint	2

n = 1417.

Table 3

Most Frequent Effects of Harassment

	Percentage of Respondents
Avoided class, work, perpetrator	19
Concentration problems; preoccupied	13
Grades suffered/unable to take tests	12
Experienced general stress	7
Interfered with work/class performance	7
Withdrawal and general avoidance	4
Negatively affected work relationships	4

n = 418.

Table 4

Mean Number of Behaviors Defined as Sexual Harassment Across Groups

	Total	Males	Females
All respondents	8.51	8.01^{1}	8.71^{2}
Undergraduates	8.11^{a}	7.26^{1}	8.35^{2}
Graduates	8.66^{b}	8.15^{1}	8.81^{2}
Civil Service staff	8.73^{b}	8.18^{1}	8.97^{2}
Academic staff	8.84^{b}	8.48^{1}	9.11^{2}

n = 3554. Range = 0 to 10. ^{a,b} = group differences, $p<.001$ ^{1,2} = sex differences, $p<.001$. Different superscripts indicate significant between-group differences.

Table 5

Attitudes Toward Sexual Harassment Across Groups

	Total	Males	Females
All respondents	1.96	2.27^{1}	1.82^{2}
Undergraduates	2.00^{a}	2.36^{1}	1.89^{2}
Graduates	1.79^{b}	2.09^{1}	1.68^{2}
Civil Service staff	2.02^{a}	2.33^{1}	1.88^{2}
Academic staff	1.92^{c}	2.21^{1}	1.69^{2}

Note. n = 3458. Scale = strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4). Higher scores indicate less sympathetic attitudes toward harassment. ^{a,b} = group differences, $p<.001$ ^{1,2} = sex differences, $p<.001$. Different superscripts indicate significant between-group differences.